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ABSTRACT

In "The Hero's Journey" Joseph Campbell identifies the patterns that inform the myths of the "hero" throughout recorded history. By using Campbell's template, this paper examines how the American war hero is portrayed and has been portrayed in film. The paper states that Americans not only define their war heroes in films but also use these film heroes to define themselves. It analyzes the shift in the portrayal of the hero in films from World War II to Korea and Vietnam. The paper explains that in Campbell's theory tales of heroes through the ages follow a consistent pattern which can be reduced to four main steps: the call to adventure or action; the hero departs, leaving the familiar; he encounters tests and trials in the new environment; and he leaves his newfound world and reenters his former one. It discusses several World War II films, including "Air Force" (1943), "The Fighting Sullivans" (1942), "So Proudly We Hail" (1943), and "Purple Heart" (1949). It then notes that although the films about Viet Nam and Korea had no call to action, the one constant theme is that each soldier will leave the familiar and enter the unknown where he will be faced with events that test his definition of who he is and what he values. The paper finds that, very much as Campbell described, soldier characters in American war films are pilgrims on the journey of transformation--they journey into the abyss as surrogates for all Americans. (Contains 36 references and 45 film references.) (NKA)

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# Defining American Heroes: Analyzing the Metamorphosis of the War Hero in Twentieth Century War Films Using Joseph Campbell's, "Hero's Journey".

by Luci A. Firth

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**Defining American Heroes: Analyzing the metamorphosis of the war hero in twentieth century war films using Joseph Campbell's, *Hero's Journey*.**

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Nowhere is America's ideal image of itself, its sense of what it can and ought to be, more clearly discernible than when in retrospection, it views itself in war. No medium has more effectively done this than has the war film by the manner in which it depicts heroes and, by so doing, defines heroism. It is intriguing, however, to note that during the last half of the twentieth century the image of the American war hero as portrayed in film changed from WWII to Korea to Viet Nam as did the common perception of him. What does this mean about us and our sense of ourselves? How and why was our perception altered? In his thought provoking book, *The Hero's Journey*, American mythologist, Joseph Campbell, identifies the patterns that inform the myths of the hero throughout recorded history. By using his template we may be able to answer these questions.

**Defining our national identity using the highly visceral medium of film**

War stories are not only the staple of the history channel but regular television programming as well. Beyond the high stakes of life or death and the dramatic interaction of the characters something more primal is operative. We not only define our war film heroes, but we use them to define ourselves. They mirror for us who we think we are, or who we hope we are, and when we don't like what we see in the mirror sometimes we banish the very hero that we created.

While our heroes are similar to those that we grafted from our Western European traditions, American heroes are in many ways as unique as the political system that calls them into action. They're not privileged kings, queens, or warriors of noble birth…they're the everyday Joe or in some cases, Jane on the street. The hero in American war films is only occasionally an extraordinary person such as Achilles or Aeneas, but more often he is an ordinary man or woman who does extraordinary things like David or Judith. He is the Everyman who represents the image of the pluralistic population of the United States. Drawn randomly from the masses, his every victory on the battlefield becomes testimony that the American experiment continues to be a success.

In the Greek, Roman, and Jewish traditions the heroic deeds of Achilles, Aeneas, and David were on the lips of young boys and old men alike, who with drumbeats and drama reverently passed their values from fathers to sons. Motion pictures dispossessed the ancient bards. Movies not only compress time, but they generate a sense of immediacy and realism. By its very nature film draws us into a larger than life world where sight and sound are choreographed for maximum dramatic impact. We're captured, mesmerized, saddened, and disgusted.

Whether or not one is a member of the WWII generation, the flag-raising scene from the 1949 movie, *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, touches something common to us all as we see the battle weary faces, hear the dramatic music, and marvel at the determination of the exhausted soldiers hoisting the red, white, and blue as America's flag billows in the wind. The director is telling us that these men are heroes who have been willing to sacrifice their lives for something larger than themselves. The films define this war as a contemporary Armageddon, the Allies vs. the Axis, democracy vs. dictatorship, virtue vs. moral corruption.

**Analyzing the shift in the portrayal of the hero**

Yet, war films depicting Korea and Viet Nam are palpably different both in the way that they approach war and in the responses that they elicit from their audiences. The war in Korea was unpopular, and in general was met with considerable ambivalence. By the time that the films

about the Viet Nam War were produced, almost without exception well after the war, the storytellers were likely to be suspicious of the government and its motivations.

Not only did the films about Korea and Viet Nam deviate dramatically from the WWII model of the patriotic war, but they also portrayed the combatants totally differently. Why did our ideas about war change so dramatically and so quickly from WWII to Korea to Viet Nam, and why did our image of the hero begin to morph in the direction of our attitudes towards the war? By examining the steps in Campbell's, *Hero's Journey*, we can formulate a reasonable hypothesis as to the answer to these questions.

In Campbell's theory the tales of heroes around the world and throughout the ages follow a fairly consistent pattern which can be reduced to four main steps: The first step is the call to adventure or action. The second step shows the hero departing or leaving the familiar, "venturing forth from the pale of society to a zone of the unknown." Within this fateful region of both treasure and danger, the hero engages in the third step of his journey where he encounters tests, trials, and directly confronts his own mortality. Often the hero receives aid as if there were some omniscient observer to this adventure who is his ally. In Campbell's final step the hero must leave his newfound world and reenter his former one, returning with the boon or reward, which can be described as something physical: the secret formula, the princess, the golden fleece, victory. The boon can also be something more ephemeral such as increased wisdom or knowledge. In any event the hero brings back something of value, something that confirms and renews his culture and its way of life.

Campbell, who was influenced by psychologist Carl Jung, believed that the tales of the hero also function on a metaphorical level. The war hero courts death on our behalf shielding us from the anguish of both literal annihilation and, to our collective relief, the psychic pain and guilt of encountering our own reluctance to take that risk for ourselves. We are ennobled by his courage as our definitions of who we are and what we value are reconfirmed vicariously. In rousing song and venerated story the war hero claims our homage, for without him we would all have to take up the sword.

What is different about the films portraying the Korean and Viet Nam wars is not that the combatants behaved in battle any differently than did their predecessors in WWII, but that the audience leaves the theater feeling somehow differently about them. Obviously, the storytellers did not have the same sense of the heroic nature of the actions of these warriors as did their fellows from the earlier era. Of course, we know from history and our own observations that the major differences in the common perception of these three wars were why should we be there risking our young, and what did we hope to achieve? Both the first and last steps in Campbell's *Journey* are missing in the latter two conflicts, and the perception of "the heroic" is thus affected.

**The Call to Action**

American war films about WWII follow Campbell's pattern quite clearly. Pearl Harbor is the immediate and visceral call to action. The descriptions of the enemy's treacherous and unexpected act propel the characters in the film to defend our homeland, our democratic principals, our way of life.

In the1943 film, *Air Force*, and the more recent film, *Pearl Harbor* (2001) for example, we see unsuspecting soldiers being bombed and strafed on a peaceful Sunday morning. The camera lingers on the graveyard of our crippled, smoking, and sinking fleet. The characters react with rage, frustration, and patriotic zeal. They are determined to regroup and fight the enemy. In the 1942 movie, *Wake Island*, we hear FDR's words declaring that America will "persevere in their righteous might and win through to absolute victory."

In the 1942 film, *The Fighting Sullivans*, the family huddles around the radio and shocked by the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, all three sons respond to the call to act by enlisting in the Navy. In reality, all three of those young men did, indeed, lose their lives serving aboard the same

ship, a tragic event that provided the impetus for the military's changing it's rules about family members serving together in war. The premise in the recent movie, *Saving Private Ryan*, is that one family should not have to sacrifice all of its sons.

In the films about Korea there is no parallel to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, no defining moment. The filmmakers do not offer any visceral *call to action* nor justification for war. Refusing to even dignify it as a war, the government euphemistically dubbed it a "police action" claiming that our national security was at risk somewhere down the road and that we needed to "draw a line in the sand" so that the potential enemy could encroach no nearer. But that line was both very fuzzy and very far from home. In our films about that conflict we waged war against the political ideology of communism fighting a formless, faceless enemy that had little direct connection to our Western European roots. It is not surprising that soldiers fulfilling their duty within such a frame would be hard pressed, as was the general public, to see themselves as heroes fighting to protect the American way of life. In general the audience is offered a view of a war that is exhausting, ugly, terrible, and largely meaningless. Survival rather than noble cause becomes the focus of a soldier's day. The film, *Men of the Fighting Lady* (1954), is a prime example. In one scene one pilot confronts another who takes risks by flying lower than regulations allow in hopes of having a more successful mission. The dialogue is compelling.

> Still playing the hero Grayson? You make me homesick for 1942. We were all heroes then when we knew what we were fighting for: a pin up of Betty Grabel; the right to boo the Dodgers; and come home to mom's apple pie. This is 1952. We're obsolete ...There are no heroes this time and no Ernie Pyle to write about them. This isn't a war. Haven't you heard? It's a police action. Nobody back home wants to read about it.

The war in Vietnam, which also was never officially declared, was essentially a long running civil war in which the military asked soldiers to expose themselves as bait to draw out the enemy. The prize: a deep-water port in the Gulf of Tonkin. Feelings of futility and bitterness permeate most of the films about this war making it incongruous to emphasize the admirable qualities of the warriors. There are more frequent conversations among the men about the lack of support from back home and how to deal with feeling abandoned than how to manage their panic attacks. Most assuredly there are some scenes that provide the audience with an insider view of the abject terror of war and how the men find a way to regulate it, but they are far fewer and more transitory than those of the WWII movies with their agenda to emphasize, as a recruiting tool, the courage of our warriors. The war in Vietnam also differed from both WWII and Korea in that the Vietnam War was about casualties rather than real estate. Courage can be bolstered by success, but the troops in Vietnam didn't have the opportunity to mark their success by gaining ground into enemy territory with the same evidence of progress, as did their predecessors.
With the exception of *The Green Berets* (1968), all of the films about Viet Nam were produced after the war and they struggle with the justification for the sacrifice of our young. Nowhere is this fact more dramatically depicted than in Oliver Stone's bitingly bitter movie, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989).

In fact, the majority of the films about Korea and Viet Nam directly claim that there was no call to action and, thus, no definable boon to be gained, and that society wasn't recognizing the sacrifice of our young in the same way as it did in WWII.

**The "test" of courage in the zone unknown**

Whichever war was being depicted, the inside two steps of Campbell's Journey remained constant. There continue to be tests of physical courage and mental ingenuity and challenging moral dilemmas that are frustratingly difficult to navigate. And young Americans continue to pass these tests and overcome the obstacles.

As Lincoln honored the men that gave their lives at Gettysburg, he described their sacrifice as "giving the last full measure of devotion." This test of devotion is clearly articulated in WWII films

such as *Air Force, Wake Island, Twelve O'clock High, The Big Red One, Purple Heart,* and *So Proudly We Hail.*

*So Proudly We Hail* (1943) features non-traditional heroes as it tells the story of a group of army nurses who escaped from Corregidore before it was overrun. One of them, Olivia, seems an unlikely heroine. In the beginning of the film she's difficult and unlikable until it is revealed that she saw her fiancée killed at Pearl Harbor. Later, huddled in an outpost building surrounded by the enemy, the nurses are weaponless and terrified of what the Japanese will do to them if they're captured. As they await their inevitable torture, rape, and death, Olivia ignores the pleas of her fellow nurses and walks toward the enemy to surrender while stuffing a grenade inside her blouse. When they surround her, she pulls the pin buying her comrades time to escape.

In the 1949 film, *Purple Heart*, the heroes are a crew of an American bomber shot down behind enemy lines and imprisoned. Although the men of the Hornet have been ordered not to give away the location of their ship. In a mockery of a trial they are threatened with execution if they remain silent. Even after each of them is brutally tortured, the group unanimously decides to remain silent. In the final scene the CO defiantly tells the judges that America didn't ask for the war, but they'll finish it. With proud smiles on their faces, the men march from the courtroom to their execution. The pace of their steps increases as the audience is treated to the stirring strains of the Army Air Force hymn, "Off we go into the wild blue yonder."

Based on a true story, the 1949 movie about the "police action" in Korea, *Pork Chop Hill,* also deals with the tests that a heroic character must encounter. The film depicts a battle over a useless piece of land located 70 miles from the peace conference at Panmunjom. Repeatedly throughout the film the officers search for some reasonable justification for risking the loss of their men. The CO, Lt. Clemone, tries to explain to his second in command. "Is Pork Chop worth all this? It just lost one company and may cost another. It's just a chip in the game at Panmunjon. Every time the reds want a chip here, they raise the ante there. I guess we've got to convince them we're not about to give up any more chips." But without ammunition or reinforcements the lengths to which he will be tested in order to succeed are well above and beyond the call of duty. Later in the story we see Clemons, absolutely outnumbered, trying to hold the hill until he and his men fall back to a small bunker that is surrounded by masses of Chinese who set the small building ablaze.

These men are willing to give the last full measure of their devotion, but this time it's not for an ideal. The boon is much more immediate and personal as Clemons explains to a soldier who is tempted to desert. This time the sacrifice confirms one soldier's fidelity to another. This same theme is reinforced in other films about Korea such as *Battle Hymn* (1957), *Men of the Fighting Lady* (1954), and *Bridges of Toko Ri* (1955).

The theme of sacrifice on behalf of the unit is also played out in the 1987 Viet Nam war movie, *Hamburger Hill.* This is no Thermopile. The soldiers, just like those in *Pork Chop Hill*, are fighting for a hill with little strategic value. During the Viet Nam war the strategy was often to drop our men into enemy territory using them as bait in hopes of drawing the enemy out. In *Hamburger Hill* the soldiers, while reluctant, have no choice but to try to accomplish their mission and retake the hill now occupied by the enemy. One of the short timers, just days from going home, takes the point and gets killed. As the squad tries to deal with the apparent meaninglessness of his death, the CO asserts, "Daniel didn't die for God, country, or the 101st Airborne…He didn't leave his god dam guts on the god dam trail in Ashau Valley for his hometown or any of that bull shit. He flanked his automatic weapon and took it out for you and the third squad. Man, don't you give him anything less."

**The "test" of making the right moral choice**

Responding above and beyond the call of duty is just one of the tests that the soldiers encounter. The films about WWII, Korea, and Viet Nam also deal with another challenge embodied in the

question, "What is the right thing to do?" To do the right thing, to seek the "higher good," may cost them their lives and/or the lives of others, and it may violate their duty to their country, their platoon, or their personal moral code. War represents the uneasy resolution of the ultimate "ends and means" issue. It affirms that there are times when the most immoral act of all, the act of taking the life of another, is necessary and just when the results are likely to bring about a higher moral good. It claims that the political entity, a nation, can make the decision for its citizens. Thus the central moral test challenging each soldier is whether he/she can personally validate this abstraction, "pull the trigger," and live with it.

This theme appears repeatedly in WWII films such as *The Big Red One* (1980), *The Young Lions* (1958), and *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (1944). In *Watch on the Rhine* (1943) we witness a father struggling to explain the realities of war to his children. "The world is out of shape when there are hungry men, and until it gets into shape, men will steal, and lie, and kill, but for whatever reason it is done and whoever does it, you understand, it is bad. I want you to remember that, whoever does it, it is bad, but you will live to see the day when it will not have to be." In *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* Spencer Tracy, portraying Jimmy Doolittle, also recognizes the potential moral conflict that his men may face.

> Let me repeat, you are to bomb military targets assigned to you and nothing else. Of course in an operation like this you cannot avoid killing civilians. If any of you have any moral feeling about this necessary killing, if you feel you might think of yourself afterward as a murderer, I want you to drop out. We'll find someone to take your place, and I promised you that no one will blame you for your feeling.

The film does not propose to solve the dilemma faced by the pilots, but it is notable that only a few flyers leave the room. Although he tells them there will be civilian casualties and they can leave without being judged if they have a moral conflict, few of the men chooses to do so.

The test of what is the right thing to do appears dramatically in the Korean War movie, *One Minute to Zero* (1952), which recounts the shelling of enemy soldiers hiding among civilians. Although the film justifies the act, Howard Hughes was asked by the Department of Defense not to release it. Another example of this moral conflict can be found in the Korean War movie, *Battle Hymn*, which is the true story of a flier who had accidentally bombed an orphanage and killed children during WWII, prompting him to become a minister dedicated to saving life. He is now recalled to active duty in Korea and must once more fly planes that bomb and kill. Luan, an old Buddhist, who throughout the film frequently offers his sage observations, sees that Hess is in anguish after he kills to protect one of his comrades. Luan succinctly articulates what he sees to be Hess' dilemma: "In times like these can a man of good conscience ask others to protect me, to kill for me, but do not ask me to stain my hands? What must one do when a choice between two evils is all that is offered? To accept the lesser can sometimes be our only choice. In order to save, at times we must destroy, and in destruction create new life."

The moral challenge inherent in killing reemerges in a most unlikely and cynical film about Vietnam, *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). The squad has finally cornered and wounded a Vietnamese sniper that has cost the tight knit squad three men. Wounded, she pleads for the soldiers to shoot her. Most are inclined to "leave her for the rats." Joker, a non-combatant, an intelligent man who throughout the movie struggles with moral complexity, is both emotionally and morally touched by her plea. Can killing as an act of mercy be morally right? He decides that it can and yet is in anguish as he draws his pistol.

Thus, no matter which war is being depicted, there remains one constant theme. Each soldier will leave the known, the familiar, and enter the unknown where he will be faced with events that challenge test his definitions of who he is and what he values. He will embark on a Heroes Journey

**The quest for the boon: meaningfulness of the sacrifice**

Within human nature there seems to be the unrelenting need to find purpose in sacrifice, in suffering. This quest to create meaning, to find purpose in a particular action or in life itself, to bring back from "the unknown" a prize worth the risk is in Campbell's thesis the boon that informs the hero's journey.

The boon in WWII films is nothing less than the survival of the free world. While many of the films made during the war could not prophesy our success, the storytellers left no doubt that the cause was a noble one worth whatever the cost. In WWII films that cost, is starkly and directly stated in *So Proudly We Hail* (1943). As the head nurse is called to the side of her dying son, she stoically bears her sorrow and affirms her belief that both her husband and her son died in the cause of freedom. In *Battleground* (1949) the Battle of the Bulge is reenacted with real war footage of the 101st Airborne Screaming Eagles. As the unrelenting winter takes its toll, on the side of the road in a brief Christmas Sermon the chaplain offers his men an answer to their question, "Is this trip really necessary?"

> And the $64,000 dollar question is, "Was this trip necessary?" Well let's look at the facts. Nobody wanted this war but the Nazis. A great many people tried to deal with them, and a lot of them are dead. Millions have died for no other reason except that the Nazis wanted them dead. So in the final show down there was nothing left to do except fight. There's a great lesson in this. Those of us who've learned it the hard way aren't going to forget it. We must never again let any force dedicated to a super race, or a super idea, or a super anything become strong enough to impose itself upon a free world. We must be smart enough and tough enough in the beginning to put out the fire before it starts. So my answer to the 64,000 dollar question is, 'yes, this trip was necessary.

The films about Korea are generally ponderous and brooding. Unlike the WWII films, the men don't banter, discuss women, sports, or what they'll eat when they get back home. There is a dearth of patriotic music, hymns, or pride in uniform insignias. The men of the fighting unit are often conflicted about the meaning of their sacrifice. For one thing the enemy becomes far more amorphous. In the film, *Steel Helmet* (1951), one soldier tries to clarify the nature of the enemy for a new replacement. "South Koreans run with you; North Koreans run after you." The boon, a staple of war films and elemental to the sense of purpose that inspired the hero to act, is more complex and far less convincing than are those of WWII. In *Pork Chop Hill* (1959) the film ends as a handful of survivors shuffle past the fresh reinforcements. There is no rousing WWII music, no singing, backslapping, or marching proudly. Nonetheless, Gregory Peck does offer us, the viewing audience, a way to find meaning in the sacrifice of the soldiers of Korea; even if we doubt his final contention:

> Pork Chop Hill was held, bought and paid for at the same price we commemorate in monuments at Bunker Hill and Gettysburg. Yet, you will find no monuments on Pork Chop. Victory is a fragile thing and history does not linger long in our century. But those who fought there know what they did and the meaning of it. Millions live in freedom today because of what they did.

What is significant in terms of Campbell's steps is that as we move from films about WWII to those of Korea and Vietnam, the nature of the boon has changed. No longer is it written in capital letters for all to see and hail as heroic. The boon, the reward, certainly wasn't victory in either Korea or Viet Nam, however many films show the main characters discovering a *more personal boon* that is the result of a different kind of courage; the courage to *create* something of value in their sacrifice. It now operates on a far more personal and internal level. Perhaps Chris in *Platoon* (1986) says it best:

> "I think now looking back, we did not fight the enemy. We fought ourselves and the enemy was us. The war is over for me now, but it will always be there the rest

of my days...But, be that as it may, those of us who did make it have an obligation to build again, to teach others what we know and to try with what's left of our lives to find a goodness and meaning to this life."

**Summary**

The "war hero" in WWII films may be viewed relatively simplistically. He/she valiantly acts above and beyond the call of duty, serving the country and, at great personal risk, protects the rest of us from danger. But this character all but disappears in the tales of both Korea and Vietnam. What does emerge in these stories, as Campbell claims, are the "hero's journeys" mentioned above, individuals who, "heroically" face the demands of war and gain the boon of personal maturity. Are they war heroes? Not in the same sense as were the characters in the stories of WWII. They are men and women who discovered heroism through war. Instead of journeying for our sake and in our place physically, they journey internally, as must we all, and by their struggles show us the way. The hero myths did not cease to exist. The changes in the world caused them to change their nature and focus.

Our movies about WWII, Korea, and Vietnam ask the most demanding questions that can be asked about war. What's worth fighting for, and what means may we use in order to achieve that success and still view ourselves as honorable and heroic? These films reveal our deepest values as they confirm and celebrate the fact that there are those among us worthy of being called heroes.

The three wars of this past century occupy totally different niches in our national consciousness. During WWII the cause for which the soldiers gave their lives was nothing less than the future of civilization as seemingly the entire world was caught up in the titanic struggle between democratic ideals and totalitarian designs. Their heroism, recognized and celebrated with pride by a grateful nation, was confirmed with stirring speeches, films, and rousing song. With almost no exceptions those who wrote the tales of Korea and Vietnam had a much different agenda. Questioning whether we had moral or legal justification for our military presence and thus good reason to risk American lives and resources.

But, while the romantic notion of the war hero was loosing some of its luster, another hero myth, one, which had even more ancient origins, was asserting itself. This was the myth of men and women driven by the vicissitudes of life (in this case war) to undertake a journey into a far country in search of their own souls. The hero's journey shifted from glorifying the success of a nation to honoring the valiant struggle of individuals as they fought others and themselves for their own souls. Often denied community support and without the moral clarity of the tales of WWII, they embarked on solitary journeys to discover whether there was meaning in the risks that they were being asked to take.

As Hess in *Battle Hymn* discovered, "Perhaps in the agony of war I have finally done what I was never before able to do. In reaching beyond myself, I have found myself."

Very much as Campbell described, these characters are pilgrims on the journey of transformation, of becoming, gaining insight about themselves and the world to which their karma has brought them. Serving as a psychological role mode, they journey into the abyss as our surrogate. If they can survive, retaining their humanity and mastering their own terror at the mindless destructiveness of others and their own capacity for brutality, then there is hope for us as well.

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